

Aligning Assessment and Instruction With State Standards for Children With Significant Disabilities



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This article presents a classroom teacher's perspective on one of the important requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legislation and aligned language found in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004)—that of aligning assessment and instructional practices with state academic content standard areas for special educators teaching students with significant disabilities. This movement has been propelled by the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, renamed NCLB, and the reauthorization of IDEA 2004. Although a goal of NCLB is to improve academic outcomes for all students, IDEA 2004 focuses upon meeting this goal by improving access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Both NCLB and IDEA 2004 put forward the belief that students' outputs and students' level of achievement are connected to the level of expectations teachers set (McLaughlin, Shepard, & O'Day, 1995).

Several researchers indicate that the process of linking assessments and instruction practices to statewide content standards shows promise for students with disabilities (Browder, 2006; Thurlow, 2003; Wiener, 2005). Despite this evidence and Federal policy directives, teachers of students with disabilities have been slow to embrace this process. According to a case study conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education (Wiener), special education teachers are often unreceptive to the idea of aligning assessments and instruction practices to content standards because (a) there is a differential of learning performance between students with disabilities and students without disabilities, (b) teachers perceive that students with disabilities are not represented in the identified learning outcomes for all students, and (c) there are low expectations of teachers and others regarding the level of learning that students with disabilities can achieve and expectations that focus primarily on student limitations (Wiener). In a study conducted by *Education Week* (2004b), 80% of the

respondents felt that students with disabilities should not be held accountable to the same educational standards as students without disabilities.

Quenemoen (2003), in comments to the United States Commission on Civil Rights on behalf of the National Center on Educational Outcomes, informed the Commission that studies, of which there are many, conclude that students generally do what teachers expect of them and that disability categories are often synonymous with signifying students with disabilities that cannot learn. Sadly, this false assumption is widely accepted by teachers, parents, advocates, and policy makers since implementation of Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 (1975). Marzano (2003), in a review of studies, found that "what gets taught" is the one school factor that most affects student achievement (p. 8). Unfortunately, low expectations influence the decisions of special education teachers when selecting what is to be taught as well as the assessment and instructional strategies used to teach that content.

Special education teachers can raise the bar for their students by raising expectations. Just as the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA 1997) changed legislation to encourage the use of person-first language, teachers of students with disabilities must follow suit and identify learners with special needs as students first and address disabilities second. Similarly, aligning instructional activities with state approved standards requires special education teachers to have a working knowledge of content standards in core academic areas. Research findings indicate that the practice of aligning assessments and instruction to content standards can be linked to increased learning outcomes for students with and without disabilities (Browder, 2006; Thurlow, 2003; Wiener, 2005). Given these findings, special educators should evaluate these studies and consider content standard alignment as a way of initiating positive change and potentially improving the system and its outcomes.

Aligning Assessments and Instruction to Statewide Standards Through Backward Planning

What does aligning assessments and instruction strategies to content standards mean for a teacher? For most teachers, especially teachers of students with disabilities, it is a total reversal of traditionally planned instruction. As defined by the American Federation of Teachers, traditionally planned instruction begins with the teacher (a) choosing a lesson from the curriculum, (b) following the order of presentation outlined in the curriculum, (c) deciding instructional activities, (d) evaluating level of mastery with a grade or feedback, and (e) proceeding to the next lesson (Jamentz, 2003). Standards-based instruction is developed through a backward design planning process which includes (a) identifying standards and the desired learning outcomes for students, (b) determining acceptable evidences of progress toward the standard, and (c)

developing instructional plans and learning experiences that aid a student's progress toward the statewide standard (Jamentz).

Aligning Standards With Curriculum

This article is not a highly prescriptive step-by-step process for all teachers of students with disabilities to follow and implement. Instead, this article offers process suggestions and reports lessons learned in one learning community. Due to varying state standards, flexibility to situational concerns is required in other school settings.

The observed learning community is in an alternative day treatment program for students dually classified with mental health diagnosis and special education needs which presents several challenges and obstacles when attempting to address students' academic needs. Students' ages ranged from 6 to 11 years old and their mental health diagnoses included, but were not limited to, (a) pervasive developmental disability—not otherwise specified, (b) obsessive compulsive disorder, (c) intermittent explosive disorder, (d) posttraumatic stress disorder, (e) autism, (f) Asperger's syndrome, (g) generalized anxiety, and (h) attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Many students also suffered the scars of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Special education classifications for the

behavioral needs, the special education teacher searched for methods to improve delivery of services promoting increased/improved educational outcomes for all the students. To help her become better equipped to provide adequate services for her students, she attended workshops and conferences sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) that demonstrated the benefits of aligning assessments and instruction strategies to state content standards. The teacher implemented the learned processes which includes three steps (1) creating alignment charts, (2) aligning standards to the curriculum, and (3) developing student portfolios. She implemented these processes to raise the level of educational expectations for her diverse group of students and to achieve maximum benefit from instruction time which was often shortened or interrupted due to students' crises.

Step One: Create Alignment Charts

The teacher created an alignment chart to be used as a constant reference when developing standards-based instruction strategies. This required knowledge of content standards as well as a deeper understanding of the learning expectations of all students. The

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students included (a) specific learning disabilities, (b) emotional and/or behavioral disorders (E/BD), (c) other health impairments, (d) developmental disabilities, and (e) autism. The common thread for all the students is severe behaviors which interfered with learning and/or were severe enough that students were a threat to the safety of others or self.

To teach students with such a wide age span and varied emotional and

State Department of Education provides sample framework posted on their Web site in which curriculum and high-stakes assessments are aligned to state content standards. This simplified the task of making these charts because the State Department frameworks were adapted and modified to meet instructional planning needs for the classroom.

Curriculum Alignment Chart. For the curriculum alignment chart, the

teacher created a simple template using a computer spreadsheet application. State content standards were cut and pasted into the template in the Y-axis cells, and the required curriculums and supplemental curriculums were listed in the X-axis. This created a curriculum alignment template that was a checklist as well as a working document to record brief statements describing the content skill covered in the curriculum. The completed chart includes the content standard, a brief statement of the objective as addressed in the curriculum, and the curriculum page number (see Table 1).

Assessment Alignment Chart. To assist in alignment of assessments to content standards, the teacher also created an assessment alignment chart to address preassessment (diagnostic), ongoing assessment (formative), and postassessment data collection (summative; Guskey, 2005; McTighe & O’Conner, 2005). The previous spreadsheet template (see Table 1), created to align curriculum to content standards, was used and adapted for this purpose. Once again, the Y-axis cells contain the content standards, and the X-axis cells list the available classroom assessments (e.g., DIBELS, CIBS-R, etc.). Teacher evaluation lists “yes” or “no” in the columns to denote if the gathered assessment information aligns with the content standard. This provides an indication of how well the assessment data aligns with specific academic content standards. The completed chart (see Table 2) states the content standard, the assessment procedure, and the content standards the assessment area addresses. It also provides information for further evaluation and identification of more specific assessment instruments to be used with the students.

Step Two: Align Standards With the Curriculum

Step two requires assembling three assessment notebooks to align standards with the curriculum: (a) a pre-assessment notebook, (b) an ongoing assessment notebook, and (c) a postassessment notebook. The teacher also developed a preassessment align-

ment spreadsheet using the Y-axis cells to list students’ names while the X-axis cells state the preassessment data used. She recorded personal or demographic preassessment information on the spreadsheet and in the preassessment notebook and filed the actual pre-assessments behind the spreadsheet in the notebook. She labeled notebook dividers by assessment type with corresponding students’ preassessments placed alphabetically behind each divider for easy access and reference.

To organize ongoing assessment information, the teacher used a second three-ring binder with dividers labeled by assessment types; students’ ongoing assessments were placed alphabetically behind each assessment divider. The ongoing assessments she used included (a) DIBELS progress monitoring, (b) Accelerated Reader reading quizzes, (c) Accelerated Reader vocabulary quizzes, (d) Accelerated Math practices and quizzes, and (e) Accelerated Math Facts in a Flash practices. Not all of these assessments were used to determine student grades, but they provided valuable documentation of learning progress aligned with content standards. For example, although Accelerated Reader reading quizzes were not used for a grade determination, they helped document student reading levels as well as the level and type of books read by the student corresponding to required content standard areas.

Step Three: Develop Student Portfolios

The teacher also developed student portfolios for collecting and presenting standards-based evidence of student learning. Student work products were gathered and organized in color coded file folders arranged by subject (e.g., yellow for math, blue for language/spelling, etc.); each student had five different colored folders with one for each subject (see Figure 1). Standards-based evidence of student learning such as test scores, project examples, rubrics, or work products was collected and placed in students’ portfolios. The teacher stapled a 3” × 5” paper tag to the top corner of each piece of evi-

dence labeled with (a) student name; (b) date; (c) concept/skill (i.e., consonant-vowel-consonant (c-v-c) pattern using short “e”); (d) standard numbers (e.g., corresponding state course of study standard reference number); (e) attempt (e.g., concepts were practiced daily so day 1 is 1st attempt, day 2 is 2nd attempt, etc.); and (f) number of correct answers/total possible answers. The tagged evidence was filed in the corresponding student’s portfolio (see Table 3 and Figures 2a and 2b).

The dividers, labeled by student name, in the final postassessment notebook included norm and criterion referenced assessments conducted during the final months of the school year (postassessment data). With preassessments, ongoing assessments, and postassessments binders, the teacher easily managed assessment data for use in developing standards-based instruction and standards-based individualized education programs (IEP).

Connecting the Assessments to Instructional Strategies

Once the alignment templates were developed, the teacher organized the assessment notebooks and created a system for a portfolio collection. She then connected all the gathered information from the assessments to develop standards-based instructional strategies addressing students’ individual strengths and needs and recognizing the progression of learning from simple to more complex tasks and reasoning. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) stressed the significance of this connection to identify students’ understanding through the method of good design.

Big Ideas or Essence of Standards

The next task, adapted loosely from the principles of Understanding by Design (UbD), (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and the Massachusetts Department of Education’s approach to planning instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, resulted in the teacher documenting high expectations and achievement for all children through access to grade level curriculum. Wiggins and McTighe explained that UbD is not a program,

Table 1. Curriculum Alignment Chart Example

Standards - Grade 1		Alignment	
Math	Scott Foresman Mathematics	Plato	Accelerated Math
NUMBER SENSE: M.1.1 Demonstrate concepts of number sense by counting forward and backward by 1's, 2's, 5's, and 10's up to 100.	Counting to 100 - Ch. 7 L 1-4 (p. 241-247), L 7 & 8 (p. 255-257), L 10 (p. 263), place value (10's & 1's) - Ch. 8 L 1-6 (p. 281-282)	Basic number ideas - whole number 0 to 9, counting numbers, whole numbers review, whole numbers 10 to 99	Topic 1 - Whole number Concepts 1: Whole number Topic 4 - Concepts II: Count by twos, fives, and tens
• Count forward and backward from an initial number other than one and use multiple representations for a given number.	L 17 (p. 319), two digit addition (add.) / subtraction (sub.) Ch. 12 L - 1 & 2 (p. 459-461), L 6 & 7 (p. 471-473), L 10 & 11 (p. 481-483)		Count by 10's and 1's to 100, group 10's and 1's to 100, count to 100
• Identify position using the ordinal numbers 1st through 10th and use vocabulary, including the terms equal, all, and none, to identify sets of objects	Counting to 100 - Ch. 7 L 12 & 13 - ordinal numbers (p. 267-269)		Topic 4 - Whole number Concepts II: Odd and even numbers, ordinal numbers to 12th
• Recognize that the quantity remains the same when the spatial arrangement changes and determine the value of the digit in the ones place and the value of the digit in the tens place in a numeral.	Place value - Ch. 8 L 1-4 (p. 281-287)		Topic 1 - Whole number Concepts I: Group 10's and 1's to 100
• Determine the value of a number given the number of 10's and 1's and determine the value of a number that is 10 more or 10 less than a given number.	Add./sub. facts to 18 - Ch. 11 L 11 (p.441), two digit add./sub. Ch. 12 L 1 & 2 (p. 459-461), L 6 & 7 (p.471-473)		
• Determine the monetary value of individual coins and sets of like coins up to \$1.00.	Money - Ch. 9 L 1-4 (p. 331-337)		Topic 6 - Money: Identify coins/values; count quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies; compare money
M.1.2. Demonstrate conceptual understanding of add. and sub. by telling number stories; joining, separating, and comparing sets of objects; and applying signs (+ and -) to the actions of joining and separating sets.	Readiness Ch. 1 L 4-8 (p. 11-24), L 9-13 (p. 25-36), time Ch. 6 L 11 (p. 229), place value, data and graphs, Ch. 8 L 7, L 9 (p. 297, 301), L 17(p. 319), money Ch. 9 L 9 (p. 351)	Meaning of add., add. facts, add. properties, add. skills, meaning of sub., sub. facts, sub. properties, and sub. skills	Topic 2 - Whole number add. Topic 3 - Whole number sub
• Solve simple word problems using a variety of strategies and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.	Add. and sub. facts to 18 Ch. 11 L 12-14 (p. 443-447)	Math problem solving	Topic 2 - Whole number add. - word problems: add. 1-step; sub. - word problems: sub. 1-step
• Solve problems requiring the add. and sub. of one- or two-digit numerals without regrouping and using three or more addends.	Add./sub. facts to 18 Ch. 11 L 3-7, (p. 421-431), L 13 & 14 (p. 445-447), two digit add./sub. Ch. 12 L 1-3 (p. 459-463), L 6-8 (p.471-475), L 10 & 11 (p. 481-483)	Meaning of add., add. facts, add. properties, add. skills, meaning of sub., sub. facts, sub. properties, sub. skills	Topic 5 - Whole numbers: add. and sub.; add./sub. facts 11 to 18 horizontally and vertically

Table 2. Assessment Alignment Chart Example

	Assessments - Reading					Assessments - Reading			
Standards - Grade 2	DIBELS	CIBS-R	STAR R	STAR Lit	Standards - Grade 2	DIBELS	CIBS-R	STAR R	STAR Lit
Reading					Reading				
R.2.1. Demonstrate phonological skills by manipulating the sounds and words of the English language and identifying syllables in two- and three-syllable words.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	R.2.10. Read orally with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R.2.2. Apply phonetic strategies to decode unfamiliar and multisyllable words using graphophonemic clues and letter-sound correspondences, including diphthongs and digraphs.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	R.2.11. Associate knowledge learned in the language arts program to life situations	no	no	no	no
R.2.3. Exhibit vocabulary skills by explaining simple common antonyms and synonyms and using descriptive words	no	no	no	no	R.2.12. Identify values, beliefs, and interests reflected in literature and other materials from various cultures	no	no	no	no
R.2.4. Demonstrate comprehension of second-grade reading materials across the curriculum, drawing simple conclusions, classifying ideas and things, identifying sequence, and retelling directions and information from textual/ informational and functional materials.	no	no	no	no	R.2.13. Demonstrate appropriate listening and communicating behaviors	no	no	no	no
R.2.5. Use patterns in language to create meaning. R.2.5A Read with fluency passages containing complex sentences.	yes	yes	yes	yes	R.2.14. Exhibit expanded vocabulary and sentence awareness	yes	no	yes	yes
R.2.6. Exhibit the habit of reading for a substantial amount of time daily, including assigned and self-selected materials at their independent and instructional levels.	no	no	no	no	R.2.15. Apply study strategies	no	no	no	no
R.2.7. Read and comprehend a variety of material.	yes	no	no	yes	R.2.16. Use appropriate sources for obtaining information.	no	no	no	no
R.2.8. Demonstrate reading improvement gained through substantial amounts of daily reading	no	no	no	no	R.2.17. Use the writing process when creating different forms of written expression.	no	yes	no	no
R.2.9. Demonstrate an interest in and enjoyment of literature in a variety of forms and contexts.	no	no	no	no	R.2.18. Use conventional mechanics and spelling when editing written expression	no	no	no	no

Figure 1. Student Portfolios



philosophy, or belief in a particular pedagogical method but an “approach to planning” (p. 8). Paralleling the principles in UbD, the Massachusetts Department of Education conducted a case study addressing teachers’ approaches to planning instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The study concluded that teachers of students with disabilities must first know the purpose and direction of a standard for all students as well as the educational outcomes expected once students master these goals. The final education outcome for students with disabilities is to achieve or to perform as close as possible to grade level standards as students without disabilities.

UbD and the Massachusetts Department of Education case study both pro-

pose that teachers plan instructional activities after the identification of big ideas or the development of an essence of content standard in order to better prioritize learning and instructional strategies. A big idea approach, according to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), assists teachers to place in order of importance the content that is taught while aiding students in understanding the value of the content standards with individualized student objectives. A team assembled by the Massachusetts Department of Education developed the essence of standard which mirrors the objective of the content standard and is based on the main concept of the standard and the proficiency the content standard requires (Wiener, 2005). This team then “created a statement of the ‘essence’ of each standard

described in common terms” (p. 3). Once the team had a consensus on the essence of the standard, the access points for a student with significant disabilities were identified based on the teams’ consensus (Wiener).

Big ideas and the essence of standard provided a starting point for the teacher in the development of standards-based instructional activities that addressed students’ individual strengths and needs. Using the newly created templates, notebooks, and portfolios and combining the parallel formats presented in UbD and the Massachusetts Case Study, it was possible for her to review content standard areas, color code similar learning expectations using a highlighter, identify big

Figure 2a. Student Evidence/Work Sample



Figure 2b. Tagged Student Evidence/Work Sample



Table 3. Tag for Student Evidence Example

Student name	
Date	
Concept/skill	
Standard number(s)	
Attempt	
Correct/total	

ideas, determine measurable/observable student outcomes, and select aligned instructional activities.

For example, nine of the Grade 5 content standards for reading address comprehension or skills that deepen comprehension during reading. So, the teacher used the matching highlighted portions of the content standards to develop big ideas or the essence of standard and successive entry points in instructional lesson plans addressing comprehension.

Lesson Plans That Connect Big Ideas or Essence of Standards to Specific Skills

Using a spreadsheet, the teacher created a lesson plan template that utilized the principles of backwards design starting with (a) the objective which is the big idea or essence of standard, (b) the gathered assessment information, (c) instructional strategies or activities, (d) the actual content standard, and (e) corresponding homework assignments. The content standard served as a reference to the big idea or essence of standard objective and successive entry points to ensure that all lesson plans remained true to the standard (see Table 4).

The teacher used the curriculum alignment notebook to identify the big idea or essence of standard to be taught each week. Standards addressing similar objectives were color coded with highlighters and a legend for easy identification was created. The teacher referenced the highlighted portions of the standards to write big idea statements and entry point statements for the weekly lesson plan, and she used the assessment alignment notebook to identify or develop assessments to provide data to document learning outcomes. After identifying big ideas, entry points, and determining assessment data needed, appropriate instructional activities were developed. Lesson planning no longer began by selecting instructional activities, but instead began with selecting student expectations and learning outcomes and the measurement of those specific learning expectations. Selecting instructional activities, the final phase of lesson plan

development, became standards-based, data-driven, and addressed the strengths and needs of individual students.

Impact of Curriculum and Assessment Alignment on Student Learning and Teacher Instruction

With curriculum content and assessment data aligned to content standards, students' needs assessed, and the big ideas identified, it became possible for the teacher to evaluate the information and identify appropriate instructional strategies. For some students, academic performance that met content standards was not difficult. For other students, the performance gap between assessed needs and content standard expectations was significant. Yet, by focusing upon the big idea or essence of standard as the primary descriptor of the learning expectations, instructional strategies were developed and alignment was achieved. Reading instruction was aligned by implementing the five components (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) of best reading practices identified by the National Reading Panel (NRP) and skills learned at the Alabama State Department of Education (2006). Reading instruction was facilitated by using learning stations addressing each NRP reading component (see Figure 3). The stations incorporated the big ideas as identified for each of the content standards. While students rotated through the stations, the teacher selected a small group of students to receive direct instruction.

An example of backwards design to instructional planning is the use of the phonics station, Word Works. The teacher used the weekly spelling list to teach the big idea of phonemic awareness and phonics concepts through manipulation of sounds and words. She made word cards using the weekly spelling words for each group or for individual students dissected by letters (e.g., c-v-c pattern) or by onsets and rimes. Vowels were always written in red. Letters/onsets/rimes were then placed in separate Ziploc® bags with

students' names on each bag and the bags clipped together with a ring (see Figures 4a and 4b). Each day, students selected their bags from the Word Works bucket and manipulated letter cards to make words.

The teacher used the spelling curriculum or textbook as a resource for the lesson rather than use it as the objective. She did not cover the lessons in the order of presentation but selected the lessons based on phonics progression charts. Except for occasionally assigning a spelling page as homework for certain students, the textbook was rarely used during instruction. By teaching phonemic awareness and phonics, as well as teaching spelling in this manner, student assessments indicated significant improvement on the weekly spelling tests as well as students' decoding skills in fluency drills.

When teaching comprehension skills, the teacher implemented the same backwards design process. Big ideas for comprehension were developed and introduced during direct instruction (sequencing, drawing conclusions, etc.) and were later added to the comprehension station. In the comprehension station, the teacher provided a short story at students' individual reading levels, and students completed graphic organizers such as character charts, story maps, and sequencing charts after reading the short story. The teacher kept ongoing formative assessment data which documented when students benefitted from repeated practice in story elements. Graphic organizers were tagged and placed in students' portfolios (see Table 3).

Incidental Learning Becomes Standards-Based

To encourage incidental learning, the teacher coded each of the books in the class library with colored dots and wrote the corresponding Accelerated Reader book level on the dots (see Figure 5). She also placed a bookworm (a visual for students to monitor their reading progress; see Figure 6) in students' reading folders with two color coded dots on the top of the bookworm with students' Zone of Proximal

Table 4. Lesson Plan Template Example

Week: September 15–19 Groups: <i>Group 1:</i> Aaron, Natalie – top half of each row (i.e., Objective/Big Ideas, Assessment Information, etc.) <i>Group 2:</i> Cody, Tristan – bottom half of each row				Subject: Phonics/Spelling Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Objective/ Big Ideas	Use tactile, verbal, and written expression skills, students manipulate letter cards to create words with consonant-vowel-consonant (c-v-c) pattern (hop, mob, hot, pot, cot).				
	Use tactile, verbal, and written expression skills, students manipulate letter cards to create words with c-v-c pattern and 4 letter words with initial and final blends (jug, mud, just, hunt, club, drum, jump, dust, rub, cup).				
Assessment Information	Tag station product; initial sounds c-v-c pattern.	Tag station product; final sounds c-v-c pattern.	Tag station product; initial sounds c-v-c pattern.	Tag station product; medial sounds c-v-c (a, e).	Tag station product; student choice (initial, medial, final).
	Tag station product; initial sounds c-v-c, blends.	Tag station product; final sound(s) c-v-c, blends.	Tag station product; medial sounds c-v-c, blends.	Tag station product; student choice (initial, medial, final).	Tag station product; student choice (initial, medial, final).
Instructional Activities	Make words with letter cards; change initial sound/write it.	Make words with letter cards; change final sound/write it.	Make words with letter cards; change initial blends/write it.	Make words with letter cards; change medial sound/write it.	Make words; student choice for change it/write it (sent).
	Make words with word families; change initial sound	Make words with word families; change final sound in c-v-c, blends.	Make words with word families; change medial sound.	Make words; student choice for change it/write it.	Make words; student choice for change it/write it (sent).
Content Standard	R.1.1. Demonstrate phonemic awareness by isolating, deleting, and adding phonemes , by using onsets and rimes, and by identifying initial, medial, and final sounds in one-syllable words . R.1.2. Utilize predictable letter-sound relationships to decode printed words, including words with consonant blends that require blending 3 to 4 phonemes into a whole word.				
	R.2.1. Demonstrate phonological skills by manipulating the sounds and words of the English language and identifying syllables in two- and three-syllable words. R.2.2. Apply phonetic strategies to decode unfamiliar and multisyllable words, using graphophonemic clues and letter-sound correspondences , including diphthongs and digraphs.				
Homework	Write words; change initial sound and write new words.	Write words; change final sound and write new words.	Write words; change initial sound and write new words.	Write sentences using words.	
	Write words; change initial sound and write new words.	Write words; change final sound and write new words.	Write words; change medial sound and write new words	Write sentences using words	

Development (ZPD) range written on the dots. Students were taught how to select books from the class library with the personal bookworm serving as a reminder of the personal book level range. As students read a book and passed the corresponding Accelerated Reader test, students colored in a segment of their bookworm. When they colored in all 25 segments and completed the bookworm, students were rewarded with a special lunch and received a new bookworm with

new reading goals. The teacher filed the Accelerated Reader quiz results in the ongoing assessments notebook so that evaluation and monitoring of students' daily reading progress was possible. This monitoring yielded data as to which students were continually and successfully reading and passing the Accelerated Reader tests for books at the high end of his/her ZPD. As it was needed, the ZPD was raised and the corresponding dots on students' bookworms were changed. This moni-

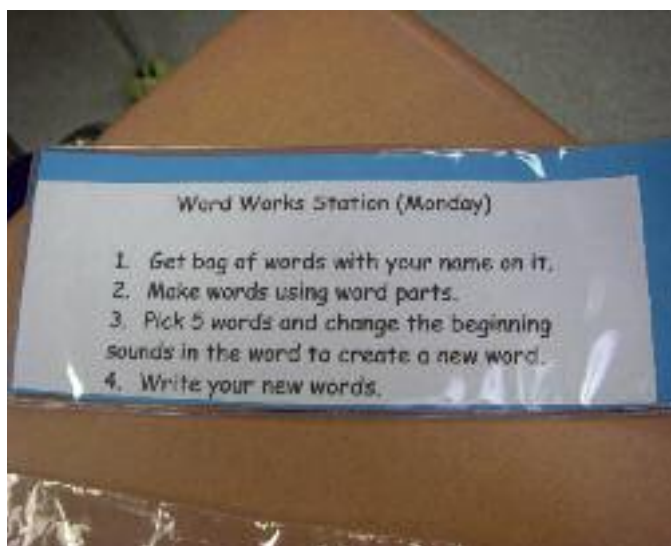
toring process also indicated which students experienced learning difficulty and needed individualized attention.

Aligning instruction to content standards provided specific data of where students were in regards to the content standards. Direct instruction and station practice focused on big ideas and were differentiated to meet students' learning needs while assisting students' progress toward the content standard.

Figure 3. Literacy Stations



Figure 4a. Word Works Station Directions



Content Crossover to Meet Content Standards

Content crossover helps teachers meet learning standards for students. For example, in a Grade 2 reading lesson there was crossover learning that met multiple content standards. Using a basal reader story, students charted on a graph how much lemonade the characters in the story sold each day. With an understanding of Grade 2 content standards, it was clear to the teacher that this activity included a reading standard (AL R.2.4), a social studies standard (AL SS.2.8.1), and addressed two math standards (AL M.2.9 and AL M.2.13). Other instructional activities across the curriculum also addressed all four content areas taught during that week's lesson. The comprehension station, as described previously, provided additional practice in creating charts and reading grids, and social studies and math class provided additional instruction and practice for these content standards.

Content crossover is a useful way to meet content standards as well as to help students develop a depth of learning. For example, one student demonstrated that he was able to transfer a skill taught in the context of a lesson to a real life situation. When referring to a skill he just learned, he commented, "This is just like a candy machine because you have to push B1 to get the candy you want." Not only did the stu-

Figure 4b. Letter Cards for Word Works Phonics Station



dent master the skill and content standards as documented on assessments and work products that week, but the student also identified “context of use” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 113).

Impact of Content Standards Alignment on IEPs

Aligning assessment data and instruction to content standards yielded another benefit for the teacher—it aided in the development of a standards-based IEP. Instead of writing an IEP where content standards were plugged into annual goal statements, it was now possible to understand the essence of a content standard where specific students fit within the big picture of the content standard as well as how students could progress toward the content expectation of the standard. Data from the assessment notebooks and portfolios documented this process clearly. The profile page of the IEP actually became a glimpse into each student’s learning strengths and needs, and the IEP was standards-based and data-driven. Supplemental instruction, modifications, and accommodations were no longer just stabs in the dark or based only on high-stakes assessments. Rather, being based on daily standards-based data, modifications and accommodations provided a better understanding of the student and the steps needed to maintain high learning expectations. As the teacher reviewed data from the assessment

Figure 5. Books Color Coded by Reading Level



expectations of students shifted from a focus on student limitations to a focus upon learning expectations. She quickly discovered that previous decisions impacting planning, teaching, and even daily discussions about students were focused on students’ limitations and what students could not achieve. Therefore, instruction strategies often followed those low expectations and, as previously stated, “What teachers expect is typically what students do” (Quenemoen, 2003, p. 4). As the teacher implemented the practice of backward design, a shift in her mind

For years, special education teachers have acted as advocates for the students they teach, which is as it should be. But when advocating for students with disabilities, teachers often focus on student limitations and fail to see the whole student and how each one can fit in the school learning environment as well as in the larger world outside of school. Aligning assessments and instruction to content standards “equips special educators with the same content knowledge that general educators have, so they (can) put their considerable skills to work adapting

Aligning instruction to content standards provided specific data of where students were in regards to the content standards.

notebooks and portfolios, a clear, data-driven, standards-based IEP emerged.

Impact of Content Standards Alignment on Teacher Mind Shifts

An unexpected outcome of this experience for the teacher was the subtle and yet powerful shift in thinking about the critical decisions of what to teach and how to teach it. The mind set of her

set regarding expectations occurred. The focus was no longer on what students with disabilities could not do, but instead shifted to “the specific learning sought, and (how to collect) evidence of such learning” (Quenemoen, p. 14). Thus, the teacher’s expectations of her students were raised as students were viewed in light of learning expectations and not learning limitations.

Figure 6. Bookworm



and modifying that curriculum, because we know that is what special educators do well" (Wiener, 2005, p. 2) and thus become "even better advocates for themselves and the needs of their students" (p. 5).

A second mind shift of the teacher that occurred was that she realized the distinct differentiation between students' acquisition of knowledge and students' understanding. The matter is complicated because of "our tendency to use the terms know, know how, and understand interchangeably in everyday speech" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Knowledge consists of the facts, whereas understanding challenges one to use the facts acquired in varied situations. Understanding involves transfer by "tak(ing) what we learned . . . and apply(ing) it to other, related but different situations" (Wiggins & McTighe). Knowledge and skills are components of learning but not learning alone. The teacher began to ask herself (a) what do the students understand versus what do the students know? And (b) how are students using what they understand in other situations?

A third mind shift of the teacher is that her focus shifted away from what was taught to what students actually learned. This might be an important result of using backward design by identifying the content standard, designing the assessment, and developing activities for instruction.

Summary

This article shares a teacher's perspective and approach to planning standards-based instruction for students with significant disabilities. It is a reflection of the desire to raise learning expectations for students with significant disabilities. For the teacher, it validates the statement by Carr and Harris (2001) that "[t]eachers sometimes must go through a toilsome process to provide this information, but the power of accessing and revising such a database far outweighs the initial drudgery of putting the information together" (p. 5 & 6). It is also evident that "[t]here is a distinct difference between alignment with the topics of standards and achievement of the expectations

included in standards" (O'Shea, 2005, p. 16).

Identification of big ideas and essence of standards provide the connection needed between actual content standards and standards-based instruction that address the strengths and needs of all students. This process revealed to the teacher the need for a connection from "transcription of a standard as a state document to that of a lesson plan" to truly standards-based instruction that "changes expectations for student learning" (O'Shea, 2005, p. 28). It renewed and refueled the teacher's desire to practice the art and science of teaching (Marzano, 2007) by creating genuine standards-based instruction for students with significant disabilities while seeking authentic evidence of student learning.

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